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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1310)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the 117th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

Before we begin, I want to welcome back members from the summer recess and introduce our new Library of Parliament analyst, Brendan Naef.

As we begin today's hearing, I want to explain that we are undertaking the fourth meeting of this subcommittee on the continuously deteriorating situation in Venezuela. At every meeting since early 2016, we've heard about the horrendous human rights violations faced by Venezuelans. The Maduro regime engages in the arbitrary imprisonment, torture and murder of its opponents. It has undermined any semblance of democratic or constitutional order in Venezuela, including recent presidential elections, which were widely condemned as neither free nor fair.

This is coupled with an economy that has declined by almost 50% since 2013. With inflation estimated to reach 1,000,000% this year, 90% of Venezuelans no longer have enough money to buy food. It's horrifying to hear reports that Venezuelans lost an average of 24 pounds last year due to food shortages.

The UN estimates that this crisis has resulted in the largest displacement of people in Latin American history, at almost two million people. This is putting an increasing burden on Venezuela's regional neighbours.

To speak to us about this crisis, we have three honoured witnesses today.

Tamara Suju is a Venezuelan lawyer specializing in human rights and is the executive director of the Centre for Studies and Analysis for Latin America in Prague.

Antonio Ledezma is a lawyer and former mayor of Caracas who was detained by Maduro's intelligence service in 2015 and is currently living in exile after fleeing to Colombia in November 2017.

Diego Arria is the former permanent representative of Venezuela to the United Nations and a former president of the UN Security Council.

Thank you all for appearing today. We will give you each a chance to speak, and then we'll go to to the committee members for questions.

Ms. Suju, I believe you're starting.

Ms. Tamara Yolanda Suju Roa (Executive Director, CASLA Institute, Czech Republic, As an Individual) (Interpretation): Good afternoon. Thank you every much to every one of you for welcoming us here today and for your solidarity as usual.

Today I come to ask the Government of Canada, through you, not to cease in your actions and efforts, and to help us get rid of this regime. These are people who steal the resources of Venezuela. In June 2012, this committee issued a report. We need an update. I call on the Government of Canada to join with the five countries of Latin America to denounce the regime in the International Criminal Court over the next few days.

The OAS Secretary General and the High Commissioner of Human Rights are bringing forward international criminal law that will help to destroy the government, because in Venezuela the judiciary is an instrument to carry out the totalitarian and criminal plans of the executive branch of Venezuela.

Today it is a concentration camp. It is an open-air jail. It is a rogue state. Even relatives of the president of the country are accused of drug trafficking. There have been violations of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and possible commission of crimes against humanity, including murder, arbitrary detention and the most horrible torture and sexual violence and forced disappearance, with one of the highest levels of corruption in Latin America. Institutions are used as a tool to destroy the rule of law.

Over the last two years, 2.3 million people have fled the country, and 1.6 million did so in 2017. Since 2006, more than four million Venezuelans have left the country, the largest-ever exodus on the continent, 12% of the population. It destabilizes the region.

There are 1.3 million of these people who are malnourished; 87% live in poverty and 61% live in extreme poverty.

The scarcity of medicine has reached 80%, and 90% for cancer. AIDS medications don't exist. Only 7% of emergency and 8% of operating rooms are operating, and 73 people die of cancer every day because they don't have prolonged treatment. Hemophiliacs, diabetics, or those who have kidney or heart disease are dying every week. Among Parkinson's patients, 50% don't have medicine. Since 2016, 50% of patients with HIV have not received medicine.

About 50% of hospital staff have fled the country. Doctors and nurses prefer to quit their jobs and not be found responsible for people who died because of a lack of medicine.

The school dropout rate is 45% because the children don't have anything to eat and they faint in school. Fifty-five percent of children under five years of age are malnourished, according to Codevida; 85% of the population doesn't have access to basic products, and at least half of the population only eats twice a day, and they're not getting any protein.

Approximately 340 people are in jail for political reasons. More than 8,000 people are being tried for simply opposing the government. Crimes such as arbitrary detention and torture and forced disappearance have expanded to the family members of people who are being prosecuted. Wives, children, cousins and grandparents are kidnapped by the security agencies and pro-government militias. They are mistreated and tortured to force them to say where the person is who's being sought. Then they are released as if nothing had happened.

These incidents of torture, which I used in my complaint before the International Criminal Court, seem to come straight out of the Nazi Holocaust or Stalinist times.

● (1315)

They use electric shocks to remove finger nails. They drown people in their feces and they destroy genitals by beating and applying electric shocks. There are civilian armed groups taking part in these acts at clandestine torture centres, which are located throughout the capital and are commanded by the intelligence services. As I said, currently there are 147 armed forces officers who are in jail for conspiracy or rebellion—the best in their classes. Some are generals. Some are non-commissioned officers. At least 70% of them have been subjected to torture and mistreatment during their period in custody, and they still are mistreated.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of you for listening to us, and I hope that Canada, as a democratic country with strong institutions, backs the complaint that these five countries are going to bring before the International Criminal Court.

Thank you very much for listening.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): We might just want to make an announcement. I notice that there are a lot of cameras, and I think people aren't familiar with the rules.

The Chair: Yes. We ask for no photography while the session is in progress, please.

Mr. Arria Salicetti is next.

Mr. Diego Enrique Arria Salicetti (Permanent Representative of Venezuela to the United Nations, Soy Venezuela, As an Individual): I would like to underline that's it's really an honour to be in Canada, close to people who care for human rights. Every time I go to a parliament, I feel closer to the people who work on human rights than anything else.

I think what Tamara Yolanda Suju Roa explained already provides an image of the country. One of the worst violations against human rights in Venezuela that I've seen for a long time is the indifference and lack of solidarity of most countries and of the international community in general. As you know, I've been to the Security Council—I've seen Bosnia, Cambodia, Somalia, Rwanda—and I understand how long it takes for politicians and diplomats to act while so many people are killed. While I was complaining to the Security Council about Bosnia, 200,000 people were killed. You know this well. I met the Canadian battalion in Srebrenica. We saw the same thing in Rwanda, where you had the very distinguished Canadian, General Dallaire. For a long time, this has been the case.

I think Canada has broken that. I think you are aware that Canada has played a very important role in reactivating the interest in our region. I don't think Canadians realize how important they are for the rest of the region as a respected, honourable, independent broker in the most important causes that affect us. I believe that the power of dissuasion that you have is enormous. It has probably not been exercised enough, but no one has been stronger than this government and the foreign minister in actually espousing our case in a very firm and clear way.

I will do a couple of tweets as a way to make some comments or to put it in context.

We don't have a government. We have a regime that has morphed into a narco-state. This means that we have criminal gangs managing the country. I was saying yesterday at the Senate that Pablo Escobar was the President of Colombia and El Chapo was the President of Mexico, but in Venezuela the counterparts are the president, the vice-president, and even the president of the illegitimate supreme court, who has been indicted for two crimes of assassination.

We are in a very peculiar and unprecedented situation that will require the international community to look at us with very different eyes. We are not a classic case of two parties, as the United Nations says. We are not two parties. There's only one party here; it's a criminal party. The moral ambivalence of the parties has created many problems in the world. Actually, the doctrine of the responsibility to protect is, in a way, an act of repentance of the international community for the crimes committed in Rwanda and Bosnia, because we looked the other way.

In fact, I'm writing a book called *A Room Without a View* because the United Nations has a wonderful room that overlooks the East River, but they have the curtains drawn because they don't want to look outside. You are looking inside, hearing us and hearing our case, and that will be very important, I think. Tamara insisted on something that will make a very strong point, which is to help in the referral of the OAS case against the Maduro regime for crimes against humanity. The Secretary General of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro, had a definitive and very significant role in bringing to the fore our tragedy, which is monumental, so I think he deserves all our support.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

● (1320)

The Chair: Mr. Ledezma, would you care to give some remarks, and then we'll move straight to questions?

Mr. Antonio Jose Ledezma Diaz (Former Mayor of Caracas, Soy Venezuela, As an Individual) (Interpretation): Thank you very much for hosting us here. All three of us are part of the diaspora of more than four million Venezuelans who've had to flee our own country because we are victims of massive and systematic repression by tyranny.

I was in jail for more than 1,000 days. I was held in custody. I never had any hearing in a framework of fair trial rights. I used to be the Mayor of Caracas. I won, and without any trial or anything, I was removed, until I decided to flee, with all the risks that are entailed therein. After going through 14 checkpoints, I made it to Colombia, where I breathed freedom.

However, we don't want to come here to talk about the drama of the ambassador who was also a victim, who lost his property and was persecuted as well. We want to talk about our country, represented by Oliver Sanchez.

Oliver Sanchez is dead. He took to the streets of Caracas with a big sign. He wasn't asking for a park. He wasn't asking for the building of a school or the right to vote, because he didn't have the right. All this gentleman, Oliver Sanchez, was asking for was the right to live. Unfortunately, he's not with us anymore.

He died because nobody took care of him. He was not given treatment. He was a cancer patient. When an offer of medications was made from another country, he had already died. Oliver Sanchez represents Venezuela, because in Venezuela, as Tamara was saying, children, just like Oliver Sanchez, die every day. As has been certified by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 300,000 children from zero to five years of age show symptoms of chronic malnutrition. They are children who run the risk of death, and if they survive, malnutrition will affect their growth.

As José Marti once said, when somebody sees a crime committed and does nothing, that person becomes an accomplice. Fortunately, though, Canada has said a lot of things in favour of the cause of liberty for Venezuela. It has not remained silent and it has allowed others to fight too, because José Marti also said that when someone is brave enough to sacrifice himself or herself for the freedom of a people, such as Mr. Almagro is doing, those who are embarrassed at least keep silent and do not stand in his way.

What we're doing here is giving testimony of gratitude for what the OAS and the Lima Group are doing on our behalf to avoid this carnage continuing.

Tamara was talking about crimes against humanity. Hitler would carry off thousands of Jews in trains and then gas them to death with pesticides. In Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro is killing Venezuelans with hunger.

Venezuela is the largest concentration camp that has ever existed in the history of humanity; it is a giant 950,000-square-kilometre concentration camp, because there is no longer legal security. The parliament, citizens like you, who were legitimately elected by more than 14 million voters in 2015, cannot meet in session because the government is militarized.

When it's not the military men who act like praetorian guards at the service of the dictatorship, it's armed pro-government groups that carry a banner and act as though it gives them permission to assault members of the parliament. The members of parliament can't even travel domestically, because they're prohibited from doing so. The members of our parliament are not paid any salary. For the legitimate parliament, it's a real odyssey to be able to actually legislate in Venezuela.

● (1325)

Now, listen closely to my words. If you conduct an investigation to know if what Ambassador Arria or Dr. Suju just said or if my testimony is the truth, we come here to tell you the truth and the whole truth and at the same time to clearly say that it's time for the international community to act under the principle of humanitarian intervention, because the Venezuelan people are being martyrized. What's happening in Venezuela has no border, and it's spilling out into other countries. Crimes don't have any borders. For example, you can see what has happened in Nicaragua and for a long time now in Venezuela.

When the argument is the principle of self-determination of peoples—and in article 8 of the UN declaration itself you can see that this principle should be preeminent—it shouldn't take precedence over the humanitarian principle when you see what's going on. It's very visible that by action or omission, the regime in Venezuela is unable to ensure either food or health for the Venezuelan people. More than 90% of the people live in conditions of poverty in a country that has the largest oil reserves in the whole world, yet it's not able to provide proper health care services.

Dr. Suju's testimony has explained all this. Last year alone, friends, more than 28,000 people died at the hands of common criminals. Venezuela has the highest inflation rate and it also has the highest crime rate: more than 80 people are killed for every 100,000 in population. There's no legal security. There's impunity, which is useful to these groups of common criminals to be able to isolate and corral members of society and do whatever they want.

What is true is that the current regime has a massive and systematic policy of repression in place. You can see with your own eyes that the current regime does not ensure food, health, or security of any Venezuelan, and therefore it is not living up to its responsibility to protect.

We call on Canada to issue sanctions against the individuals who are responsible, who have been and are responsible for drug trafficking, terrorism, corruption and crimes against humanity. May Canada also join the governments of such countries as Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Peru in submitting or endorsing the OAS's report, which has been filed in the International Criminal Court.

Good afternoon, and thank you very much.

● (1330)

The Chair: Thank you very much to the three of you for your testimony. We're going to go straight into questions, beginning with MP Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank our witnesses for being with us here today. I wish we didn't have to keep coming back and going over this issue again and again.

There have been almost 20 years of mismanagement, of corruption and of violent maintenance of this regime. Typically these types of regimes need outside support or they're not going to survive. One nation really stands out as having supported the Venezuelan government, and that's China.

Over the past 10 years I think Venezuela has received over $65 billion from China. China owns the largest share of the government debt. Fifty-five billion dollars has come in to get control of the energy sector in Venezuela. As is typical, the Chinese government has taken advantage of poorer nations to try to get access to their resources. I think it was mentioned that their resources are being taken out of the country.

In 2009, there were $16 billion in loans. By 2012, one in three barrels was going to pay interest on the loan that China had in Venezuela. We've just seen this past week another $5 billion in oil for loan money that's been granted.

I see that China actually does sell some things back to the Venezuelan government, but it's primarily military hardware.

Can you comment about the role of China in Venezuela in the future?

I'll turn it over to my colleague afterwards. I think he'll talk more abut the present, but I'm interested in the future, in China's role in Venezuela in the next few years, and how that will impact your people and your country.

Mr. Diego Enrique Arria Salicetti: You know, the role of China and Russia in our region is becoming very alarming. In the last negotiation of China with the regime, they facilitated some easing of payment in the short term, but they said that they were going to survey in situ the behaviour of the regime. That means that they're getting involved in the political system of Latin America.

I should have said at the beginning that this is not our problem anymore. This is a regional problem. We are really a threat to the stability of the region. I'm sure you know that we have about 60,000 Cubans in Venezuela. When we had the War of Independence, we had 22,000 Spaniards come into the country.

These 60,000 people control the army, the intelligence service, the notaries, the registries. They issue passports and ID cards. We are actually subordinate to the Cubans, and the Cubans are very close now to the Chinese. In a way, we are going back rapidly to the Cold War. If you go to the Security Council with the case of Venezuela, immediately China and Russia veto it, and it's the same thing with Nicaragua.

We don't have any way out in the Security Council. We had a meeting under a formula that has my name two weeks ago at the United Nations, and we were able to expose our tragedy. However, the case of China—and I'm very happy that you raised the issue—is to me an alarming new element in the context of what's happening in Latin America.

Mr. Antonio Jose Ledezma Díaz (Interpretation): We would like to take advantage of this forum to say, with much respect to the present rulers of China, that when we recover our democracy—and we hope that will be soon—we are going to make an effort so that the foreign policy of Venezuela is a state policy and not one based on friendship. We want to have the best possible relationship with democratic countries in the world. However, in the case of these credits, these loans, we are asking the Chinese government that any money given to the dictatorship will not be spelled out when the indebtedness is put in black and white, which will be accepted by Venezuela. In keeping with our constitution, any indebtedness must be previously authorized by the Venezuelan parliament, and this is not happening at present.

Venezuela has on its back a debt that cannot even be quantified, because those operations have been managed in a muddled situation. However, we're speaking about $170 or $180 billion U.S., and much of that money is not in the form of hospitals or schools or roads or parks; it is rather in fiscal havens. We are going to rescue that money when there's a democratic government again in Venezuela. Much of that money purchases weapons in Venezuela, where there is no meat, no bread, no chicken, but there are tanks, guns, rifles, because a mad arms race has been unleashed. As well, it is a matter of exchanging oil for any kinds of trickery. I don't know what expression to use for it. This is the way that the country has become indebted: by selling oil futures and thus compromising the future of our country.

So that you may have an idea of the tremendous disorder of this false revolution, when Hugo Chávez reached power in 1999, oil was at $7 per barrel. It reached up to $140 U.S. per barrel. The debt back in 1999 was $33 billion. Now the debt is $170 billion or $180,000 billion. This is the situation that must be corrected.

● (1335)

The Chair: You may have a short question.

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Ledezma, I want to address your testimony.

With regard to your neighbours—Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Brazil, Peru—have they initiated sanctions against members of the Maduro regime? It's a narco-state, so obviously those people are coming and going. Have any of those countries issued arrest warrants for any of the members of the regime?

Mr. Diego Enrique Arria Salicetti: Not yet. The only one so far, on fiscal or monetary sanctions, would be Panama. They have more or less spoken about it. No other country, except the United States Treasury and the European community, has done something in that regard.

Mr. Antonio Jose Ledezma Diaz (Interpretation): I would like to express a recognition that an important sanction, as mentioned by Dr. Suju, as part of one of the struggle is that the governments of Colombia, Chile, Argentina, the new administration in Paraguay, and the government of Peru are going to be endorsing the report of Mr. Almagro of the OAS before the International Criminal Court. That is a very important sanction.

As has been said, we're hoping that financial sanctions will materialize, such as what was agreed upon in the Lima Group on May 14 this year as a result of a meeting that was held in Mexico City.

There was already progress made by the Government of Panama, and we hope that this will materialize in the coming days.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now going to move to MP Fragiskatos, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have seven minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm going to be splitting my time with Ms. Mendès.

Thank you very much for being here today, and for your advocacy. I think it's quite heroic, to be frank, considering the context in Venezuela, for you to be testifying here today. It's inspiring.

I have to say that I have a Venezuelan community in London, Ontario, the city I represent in the House of Commons. I know they are paying attention here today, and looking for better things for Venezuela in its future.

I appreciate very much the fact that it was highlighted that Canada has been extensively involved in raising attention when it comes to human rights abuses, in particular in Venezuela, and other abuses of democracy. Targeted sanctions have been applied to 73 individuals. That includes Mr. Maduro himself.

Canada has been active in the OAS and other international forums raising these concerns. It's my sincere hope that our government will continue to do so.

My question relates to the regime itself and to its future. This is a regime that lost legitimacy the moment it won. I wonder how much longer Maduro can remain in power, considering the situation the country finds itself in. At the same time, I look at the military and the police force, and I want to ask about their loyalty. Reports have emerged from Venezuela on a very regular basis focusing on the military and the police testifying to the loyalty of both of those apparatuses to the Maduro regime.

I wonder if you could speak to that. Do the military and police, generally speaking, still remain loyal to the regime, and is it foreseeable that they will continue to do so?

● (1340)

Ms. Tamara Yolanda Suju Roa (Interpretation): I will respond to this question regarding especially inmates, prisoners. In the last few months, 147 officers have been detained. These are the highest elites, the generals and colonels from all of the four components of the armed forces. They were detained because of conspiracy and rebellion. Also, there are those who are being sought out who have left the country or who are living clandestinely. The structure of the armed forces is totally broken down. The armed forces are being pursued. The Cubans are also going to try to seek out these officers.

In keeping with the latest denunciations, Cuban personnel are apparently directly committing these crimes against humanity in Venezuela. This is a denunciation that is about to come out, because we're learning about more and more cases every day. We have repressed armed forces in which the officers, when they go home, are not allowed to bring their weapons because they are afraid.... They just have to go home to sleep without their regular weapons. They are pursued, as well as their families. Their communications are intercepted.

Maduro maintains himself in power because of the high command, which is linked to drug trafficking. They acknowledge that they have no other way out. They know that they are corralled. The discontent of the armed forces is such that every week over 700 officers are asking to be let out.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

Ms. Tamara Yolanda Suju Roa (Interpretation): They are now being considered traitors to the country. That is the structure nowadays.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm going to turn it over to Ms. Mendès, because we're about at the halfway point of the split time.

I asked the question specifically about the military and the police because, obviously, if they remain loyal, as with any authoritarian regime, the regime tends to last. It's not a perfect comparison, but Syria is analogous here. I think it's relevant to look at that situation, because the military forces and the police for a long time remained loyal to Mr. Assad.

In any case, I turn it over to Ms. Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Thank you very, very much to my colleague.

[*Member speaks in Spanish*]

[*Translation*]

I represent a riding with a sizable and very long-established Venezuelan community in Brossard. It is a very vibrant community.

We have received a number of asylum claims recently. These people crossed the U.S. border and came to Canada seeking political refuge. I am pleased with the questions my colleague asked because they are very much related to the cases I have had recently. I am referring to former Venezuelan police officers who first sought refuge in the United States, and then in Canada. They were denied refugee status here and were deported to Venezuela. I am very worried about what will happen to them once they get to Venezuela and would like to hear your thoughts on that.

What do you know about these people who are deported to Venezuela after not finding refuge elsewhere? What happens to them?

Mr. Diego Enrique Arria Salicetti: It is very alarming. I do not really have any definite information for you, but it is indeed a problem.

● (1345)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: The reason I ask the question is that it seems that, according to Venezuelan sources, President Maduro has apparently announced that anyone who had an official position in Venezuela, who has sought refuge elsewhere, and returns is considered a traitor. If a person is considered a traitor, they would normally be sent to prison, if not worse.

Is that really what is happening in Venezuela now? Is that the situation?

[*English*]

Mr. Antonio Jose Ledezma Diaz (Interpretation): Yes. When police or military people return to Venezuela, they are under penalty of death. They go to the mountains. A young person was deprived of his freedom for five years. As for the military members who have expressed rebellion, as Mr. Fragiskatos said, in Venezuela there are certain members of the military who have become enriched. Many of the denunciations for the deposits in a bank in Andorra are from drug trafficking. They have what they call "the cartel of the suns". Venezuela nowadays is indeed the centre of operations to legitimize capital from drug trafficking, and there are, indeed, many examples.

An Air France plane, for example, left with 14 suitcases filled with drugs. It was detected upon arrival in Paris. The drug trafficker was then detained with over 25 bags, trafficking thousands of kilos of drugs.

If it is not drugs, it's gas. Every day there is contraband equivalent to 100,000 barrels of oil in gasoline, petrol. You can fill up a tank of gas in Venezuela, and you can have 33 cisterns or trucks for one dollar. This gasoline, which is being given away by the regime, is contraband for the military. This is the elite that sustains the dictatorship.

How long will this last? As representative Mr. Fragiskatos said—

The Chair: Excuse me; I just have to interject, because the time's up. I want to be fair to our colleague over here.

MP Hardcastle, I know you're on a timeline.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): I appreciate that, Mr. Chair.

I will make my question as swift as possible so I can hear you, but I am going to have to step out before you're done.

It is important, and I hope that we have a balance in this discussion with you about the way forward and our role in international human rights and the diplomatic aspect. Building the capacity for democracy in Venezuela will require international relationships and support, not just punishments, or harsh realities or sanctions. I'm sure you realize that. I know that there are "NiNis", the middle people who are neither left nor right in Venezuela. During the election I read a lot about the opposition—which is also fractured—trying to attract those people. How do we link and build consensus with them? Is that a part of how we get to the whole population, in terms of appealing with diplomacy to help build the capacity for democracy? I know that is abstract.

The horrific crimes and human rights abuses are well documented. We know of the fractured opposition. We understand that. We need some balance in how we formulate our responses as a country, about finessing the diplomacy and reaching.... There is a middle group that does not see either side. I feel like that group needs to build a political awareness. Is that where we help with the human rights assistance?

I'm trying to put all my questions into one right now so that you can take as you need for the comments. I am going to have to leave, but I would like you to weigh in.

● (1350)

Mr. Diego Enrique Arria Salicetti: I personally believe that we, the country, must come out whole. We cannot come out in parts. That, to me, is essential if we want to have stability in the future. We aim to have some sort of reunification eventually, which is easier than reconciliation, as we know from other processes, like in Bosnia or even El Salvador, which is in our region. That's something we have very much in mind.

Diplomacy has become a bad word for the people in Venezuela who are dying. They ask, "How many more people have to die? How many more people have to leave the country? How many more children? When are we going to reach a limit?" Diplomacy as a currency has been absolutely devalued. We have been, actually, victims of diplomatic exercises. We have been promoted, for example, by the Spaniards at one time—Rodriguez Zapatero—and other countries. Some of our own political parties participated in that, which has actually damaged the credibility a lot.

You're talking about the people's credibility in the process. We have to build on that. That's very important. That's what I said at the beginning. Canada is an honest broker, honourable and distinguished. It has a great soft power that I believe will be extremely important. You know, we speak to many Canadians—Professor Cotler, for example—who are really influential in our thinking. Why do we do that? We see him and Canada as probably our best allies in this fight.

Mr. Antonio Jose Ledezma Diaz (Interpretation): I would add further—

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Go ahead. There's still time, but I have to leave.

Mr. Antonio Jose Ledezma Diaz (Interpretation): —that over 90% of the national population is requesting a change of regime. We speak on behalf of that 90%. There's a majority who do not want to have a false dialogue, who want to leave dictatorship as soon as possible. If this dictatorship has done something, it has been to unite the country and its majority, very sadly, amidst misery.

Here in Canada there are parents who have children in Venezuela, or in Venezuela there are children who have their parents or their grandparents here in Canada. This happens throughout the world. That's another issue we have put forward: benevolence for that diaspora, which suffers so much when it finds itself in legal limbo. They don't know what's going to happen to them when they come to Canada, the United States, or South America.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before I turn the floor over to my colleague Mr. Tabbara, I have a follow-up question for you, Ms. Suju.

You mentioned a number to do with the number of political prisoners still in jail. I just want to get clarification on that number. Were there 300, or what was the number you stated of political prisoners in jail at the current time?

Ms. Tamara Yolanda Suju Roa (Interpretation): There are 340 prisoners.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, MP Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank you all for being here today.

I want to follow up on the question of my colleague Mr. Fragiskatos on the regime. My colleague was asking whether the military, police forces, and security forces in Venezuela were still loyal to the regime.

We've heard about the economic crisis within Venezuela and also about the crumbling infrastructure, with power cuts and water accessibility problems for many people. When the military and security forces see all of this crumbling of the nation, with the lack of employment, of health care services, of all kinds of services, how do they remain loyal to a regime that has really failed in all aspects of the state?

Mr. Diego Enrique Arria Salicetti: It's unimaginable that the armed forces as a whole would support the regime.

The armed forces are like a big family, and in a way they mostly represent, as the mayor was saying, what about 90% of Venezuelans reject. These are armed forces dominated and controlled by the Cubans. It is amazing that a small country like Cuba is like the occupying power in the nation of Venezuela and that we cannot talk to the military. They are all the time under scrutiny and are spied upon by the regime. Even among themselves they don't talk very much, because they don't know which of them is working for the Cubans. We are really trapped, in Venezuela. This is an unprecedented case.

I have to imagine, when you look at the figures Tamara was mentioning, of 340 officers having recently been taken to jail, that it means there's a fracture. The ones in jail are lieutenants, captains, majors, and lieutenant-colonels, who generally are the ones who really control the armed forces. I believe, then, that the armed forces are very fractured and that something may happen there.

Without the military, we'll never be able to rescue our country, because we have not only the Cubans, but we have the guerrilla forces of Colombia that have remained in Venezuela; we have the Hezbollah groups; we have the paramilitary. They have about 200,000 men. How can we rescue our country in that situation? Plus, the narcocartels will defend themselves. Venezuela is the biggest sanctuary not only for drugs, but for money laundering, for the arms trade, etc. Without the armed forces, we would not be able.... The armed forces will require international support.

● (1355)

Ms. Tamara Yolanda Suju Roa (Interpretation): The breakdown that you have mentioned has a lot to do with repression. At present, the Venezuelan administration is using the collective paramilitary armed groups to conduct violations, together with the FAES and CONAS groups: to abduct people, to make them disappear, and to have others come back. They are using these collective groups and groups that had not been performing before in an open manner to sequester people.

Security organizations tell us there is tremendous discontent, not just institutionally but in the armed forces, except for the high command, which is totally committed to the government. In some way, internally there is already some kind of rebellion among those groups. If you ask a colonel or lieutenant-colonel or if you know that a colleague of yours has been in prison and has been tortured and that his family has also been violated, there has to necessarily be tremendous discontent.

This is what we see today in Venezuela generally in the national armed forces, as well as within certain bodies that are now rebelling against the repression against their own colleagues.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have time for one last short question before we adjourn, and it's going to go to MP Sweet, please.

Mr. David Sweet: First, thank you very much to all the witnesses. Time is always our enemy, and I have a lot of things I'd like to ask you.

This is the first time, by the way, that our committee has heard of the magnitude of the involvement of the Cubans within the country right now. We've heard about the other gangsters, and we've heard about some of the extremists.

Because you mentioned that the only way the country is going to be released from this tyranny is with your own military, I will ask, do you have senior military people who are in exile who are able to plan and muster without the fear of being incarcerated or murdered? You may not even want to answer this.

Mr. Diego Enrique Arria Salicetti: I wish I could tell you yes, but I'm not so sure. We have a lot of them, but are they coordinated in a way to do something? It's difficult to answer.

Mr. Antonio Jose Ledezma Diaz (Interpretation): Yes. There are some members of the military who are discontented, who feel ashamed. Malnutrition and hunger have reached the military headquarters, and the military, as you know, are also human beings. They happen to eat. They get thirsty. They have families.

This year in January they murdered an inspector in the so-called massacre of El Junquito, a small community where there had been a rebellion. Then, by March, a captain was captured who had headed an assault, an attack, against a military headquarters in Venezuela. General Rodriguez Torres is now also detained. He was one member of the military group that supported the revolution. Then there was a so-called rebellion this year in May with the commanders of that so-called rebellion, the Ayala battalion.

Recently there was another act of violence with members of the military under a situation of rebellion. As Ambassador Arria was telling us, the armed forces and the institutional reserve of the armed forces have to necessarily play an important role in the establishment of the rule of law in Venezuela.

● (1400)

Mr. Diego Enrique Arria Salicetti: Let me add something to that. They say that the military obey until they cease to obey. That we have seen. It's difficult to read them, because the climate of intimidation is such that they are very afraid, and the Cuban issue is of fundamental importance in our case. The Cuban situation in Venezuela is very much a link.

That's why, for example, I personally criticized the U.S. when they had this Cuban-American agenda. I said that they could not have a Cuban-U.S. agenda excluding Venezuela, because the Cubans are in Venezuela. They have killed people. They persecute people. They have not killed or tortured Americans. In their agenda it's very important to have Venezuela and Cuba as a case, I would say, a symbiotic case.

Mr. David Sweet: Maybe we can have our witnesses stay there for 30 seconds, and we can help them with some social media by taking a picture after we adjourn.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to thank each of you. Once again, this committee has been and continues to be seized with the issue of the intense repression happening in Venezuela. We thank you for being here and bringing it first-hand to us. It's so important, as you've mentioned, that our Parliament and our colleagues continue to be engaged on this point.

If you can just stay there, we're going to adjourn and then come over to you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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